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Armelle Sabatier, *Shakespeare and Visual Culture–A Dictionary*

Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard



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REFERENCES

Sabatier, Armelle, *Shakespeare and Visual Culture–A Dictionary*, London. Oxford. New York. New Delhi. Sydney: Bloomsbury–Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017, 295 p., 5 b.& w. figs. ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-6805-2.

- 1 The contents of this Dictionary include, in order of appearance, a list of Figures, Acknowledgements, the Series Editor's Preface, the list of Abbreviations, a list of Headwords, an Introduction by Armelle Sabatier, A-Z, a Bibliography and an Index. Armelle Sabatier's detailed introduction delineates the main fields of interest which have guided the selection of headwords among the lexical fields related to the semantic field of Visual Culture. The choice of these two words for the book title indicates that the word 'Dictionary' is only to be understood as a justification for the alphabetical order in which the main themes are examined.
- 2 The introduction falls into five subparts respectively entitled: the anti-visual prejudice, Elizabethan and Jacobean visual arts, visual eloquence, colours in Shakespeare, methods and purpose. We are first reminded of the cultural conventions ruling public opinion in an age of re-assessment of the value of images: these alternate between two distinct traditions, in the religious one, henceforth excluded on the grounds of the Henrician Reform, and in the secular one of ornament and memory, in which their use was continued. The particularly original field of what the author chooses to call "visual eloquence" is then carefully delimited by references to the *ekphrastic* tradition, the Italian debate of the *paragone*. Finally, the author reviews the different critical approaches or 'methods' which precede her own, and justifies her purpose by her entirely original use of what might appear as a neologism to some readers, "visual culture", instead of the usual "visual arts". She writes "the expression 'visual culture'

chosen for the title of this book offers the possibility of exploring the Elizabethans' visual experience which is not limited solely to pictures and statues as was previously the case [...] it also enables to take into account both material culture and the literary and rhetorical aspects of visual elements." (Sabatier 13). Shakespeare's own understanding of the relation between non-verbal—called 'material' by the author—, and verbal—i.e. linguistic—visual experience, underwent a change, from mimesis as imitation of nature to mimesis as art itself, a change that will be recalled when necessary in Sabatier's dictionary.

- 3 Since the book is a dictionary, this review will not account for each of the 244 entries—i.e. words—found in Shakespeare's works, but instead account for the five thematic entries so usefully indicated by the author in her introduction.
- 4 **Anti-visual prejudice** and censorship appear in the use of words dealing with visual perception such as the reference to optics in "look", "view", "vision", "gaze", "ocular", but also references to the visual appearance of things, such as "tinct/tincture", "varnish", "gleam", "glitter", "gloss", "glow". Related to this rejection of visual experience as dangerous, are terms connoting religious iconoclasm: "saint", "statue", "idol", "idolatry", "mock", "flatter", "superstition", "wanton" and of course "tongue-tied", "silence". Besides these literal references to censorship the Dictionary tells us of the polysemy of key words which also bear metaphorical connotations, among which their use to signify censorship. For example, "gild" which is a technical term signifying the practice of coating an object of art with a pigment containing actual gold, is also used metaphorically to signify deceit, and justify the condemnation of art as deceitful (Sabatier 97).
- 5 **Elizabethan and Jacobean visual arts.** The various fields of craftsmanship in which artists and craftsmen could prosper: "ornament", "jewel", "limn", "miniature", "portrait", "portraiture", are listed in this Dictionary. Thus "monument" is given several pages (Sabatier 147-151) as well as "statue" (Sabatier 225-230). Their large number testifies to a widespread valuation of visual ornament and pictures as an important part of Elizabethan culture. Yet the absence of sets on stage and the distant places both in space and time in Shakespeare's drama rendered a large number of descriptions necessary in order to appeal to the audience's visual imagination. A telling example of this cultural practice is the play within the play in *King Lear* (4.6.11-24), with the Dover Cliffs being depicted as present in front of blind Gloucester.
- 6 **Visual eloquence.** This concept enlarges upon what looks like an inventory in order to analyse the various cultural fields in which visual arts were practiced as part of a central subject of discussion, the 'paragone' or comparison and competition between literature and images, verbal and non-verbal modes of expressing abstract ideas such as beauty, morality, or their opposite, ugliness and immorality. Lexical units include "Monument", "tomb", "chimney-pieces", but also "tapestries", "weave", "hangings", or "arras", "painted cloths", "curtains", and of course "ceremonies". Related to these 'eloquent' ornaments is the abstract semantic field of "image", in "pictures", "figures", "effigy", "emblems", "heraldry". Visual culture appears significantly in words referring to visual manipulations of appearances such as "perspective", "proportion", as well as "*captatio benevolentia*" in a detailed study of the use of the word "look" (Sabatier 139-141). It also establishes effects of transposition, or even synaesthesia as for example when stones such as "alabaster", "marble", are compared to "ivory" and "lily". The Dictionary has a great wealth of quotations from Shakespeare's plays as well as his

poems which testify to the notion of ‘visual eloquence’. But the concept of visual eloquence is even more clearly established in the use of words belonging to the semantic field of colour.

- 7 **Colours in Shakespeare.** This is by far the most elaborate and detailed lexical paradigm which is found in many entries of the Dictionary. The word ‘colour’ itself is discussed with its variety of meanings in an interesting manner, since it is sometimes used literally and often used metaphorically. We are first reminded that in Early Modern England—Sabatier prefers the term Renaissance England (Sabatier 54)—, the word was highly ambivalent: it was tinged with pejorative connotations. Indeed, metaphorically, the word “colour” could be used as a synonym for pretence or lies. On the other hand, “colour” was used as a system of signs, as in heraldry, or in Hilliard’s parallel between colours and precious stones. And there exists a number of works listing the encoded meanings as Sabatier reminds us (Sabatier 60). But “colour” does literally mean the diverse hues and tones that can be perceived by the human eye, whether by intra-or extra-mission. This is the meaning Sabatier manages to track down through Shakespeare’s use of the word “colour”, thus underscoring an important meaning of the word which is usually left unexplored (Sabatier 56). In Shakespeare’s plays, she notes how characters discuss shades of colours, as in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (1.2.83), or compare colours, as in *As You Like It* (3.4.9-11). Colours are used to help audiences visualize the landscape or setting of a scene. In *The Tempest*, Gonzalo speaks of seeing green where Sebastian says he sees tawny. (Sabatier 109). The word “colour” also alludes to complexion and emotions, according to the Galenic theory of humours, while it refers to rhetoric and style in elocution by analogy with the complexion of the face. Sabatier quotes at length the comic use of colours in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (1.2.73-85) in which green embodies the elusive nature of visual perception (Sabatier 109-110). This point is also relevant to the fashion of fools to wear a motley coat (Sabatier 152-3). The Dictionary also explores Shakespeare’s use of colours separately in great detail, and deserves to be read extensively on that subject.
- 8 **Methods and purpose.** Visual conceits in words such as “imitate”, “ape”, or “artificial”, “art”, also contribute to the mapping out of visual culture of the common public of Shakespeare’s plays, mostly more or less educated Londoners of course. They too convey the ambiguity of the relationship to visual experience in everyday life. An interesting aspect of the general subject of visual culture and experience is the particular field of perspective—i.e. the depth of a scene, the volume of an object—and visual perception. Visual perception indeed ultimately appears as the principle of selection which has guided the orientation of the Dictionary upon a specific field. Important pages are an opportunity for developments on aspects of visual culture, such as “eye,” “gaze,” “glance.” By focusing on the paradigm of visual perception, the Dictionary selects a phenomenological approach which is quite original in Shakespearean criticism. Shakespeare the writer appears in a new light as experimenting with the lived—i.e. ‘embodied’—visual experience of his characters in order to give them psychological density. It is more precisely through their visual perception which is described in their words and actions, that their psychological approach of reality is depicted. And of necessity, this perception is the actual source of the change of their intentions and its resulting dramatic action. Visual perception is truly used to dramatize their inner life, as many quotations selected by this Dictionary from both poems and plays unquestionably show. For example, it is through the dramatization of visual perception that we have access to passion, such as lust (in *The*

Merchant of Venice Sabatier 133) and shame. This interpretation was suggested to me by reading the Dictionary as a book. It is an instance of the way in which this Dictionary can be read item after item instead of the usual practice of looking up a word independently from the whole Dictionary. I would also argue that visual experience as a form of empathy allows us to better understand Hamlet's inner struggle between passion and reason by the visual perception which is brought to light during his encounter with the ghost. On the other hand, it is Hamlet's own understanding of the effect of visual perception and drama which inspires him the idea of "The Mousetrap" in order to make visible to all the invisible murderer hidden in Claudius. The detailed discussion of "image" is relevant here (Sabatier 118-121). On the other hand, Sabatier also examines the use of a frequent stage prop, i.e. the torch, and visual perception as the revelation to the audience of Romeo's otherwise 'invisible' inner life, as he turns from melancholy to passion, or Othello's inner conflict (Sabatier 134-135). Hence the predominance of developments about words such as "light" (130-137), "look" (139-141) and of course "image" and "imagination" (118-124). The method of this Dictionary is therefore more than paradigmatic and linguistic, it also chooses a phenomenological approach to examine passages from Shakespeare's works which dramatize visual perception *per se*.

- 9 For this reason, the Dictionary can also be read as an account of a theory of visual experience which appears in the recurrence of words which, not belonging to the Shakespearean vocabulary, are nevertheless keys to our understanding of the poems and plays in the light of Early Modern visual culture. For example, *ekphrasis* is used twenty times, as we read in the very useful Index, and much more actually. The term is defined early in the Dictionary (Sabatier 8) as "the rhetorical description of a work of art", to quote Homer's verbal description of Achilles shield. We are told this rhetorical exercise was taught in Tudor schools and widely practised in Early Modern England. It is the illustration of the *paragone* or debate between poetry and painting. By quoting the conceit in different entries of Shakespearean vocabulary, the Dictionary makes us aware of the role of imagination as a way of creating a "powerful illusion of presence" (Sabatier 8). Similarly, the specific visual experience caused by the "white speck" on the sitter's eye in a portrait, which is an illusion of movement addressing the spectator's gaze, is found several times in Shakespeare. However, it is necessarily an illusion experienced by a character describing a portrait within the diegesis, and has little to do with the 'presence on stage' of a character (Sabatier 152). Such devices produce an interface mediating between the world of non-verbal visual icons and the world of poetry, not only by their rhetorical nature, but by the reliance on the visual connection between subjects and objects. On the one hand, comparing the different quotes in the Dictionary, I would say that they dramatize the ambivalence and uncertainty of the relation between subject and object—as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2.2.103-4) when Lysander's perception has been upset by Puck's juice and his words depict a portrait of Helena which is invisible (Sabatier 20), and, on the other hand, they show how dependent on visual experience the subject is—as in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1366-7, Sabatier 84) when Lucrece visualizes a painting of Priam's Troy. Such is also the word "emblem", which is actually used by Shakespeare, and which is found several times in the dictionary with a similar purpose. Emblems, widely accessible thanks to printing, allow visual experience to act both as perception in an actual image and as imagination, in a necessary representation of an abstract notion called 'conceit'. For example, in *Julius Caesar*, the bleeding statue that Calphurnia sees in her prophetic

dream as an ominous prediction of Caesar's death (*Julius Caesar* 2.2.76-8) is interpreted by Decius as a symbol of renewal (*Julius Caesar* 2.2.84-88, Sabatier 228-9). Other terms re-appear with a similar function such as "Petrarchism", or "paint", "painting", or "eye" and "sight" or "view". The latter are part of the Shakespearean idiom but the Dictionary shows their different meanings in a fascinating manner, making these words take a different connotation depending on their context, which results in broadening our understanding of Elizabethan 'visual culture'.

- 10 To conclude, I would say that this is indeed what Armelle Sabatier means by "visual eloquence" (Sabatier 7), i.e. a wide range of cultural connotations which can be used in the texts depending on the dramatic situation because of the individual spectator's own private 'visual' expectations, as the use of commonplace books and emblem books amply documents. But it also appears from this Dictionary that Shakespeare's dramatic use of visual culture is actually grounded on a deep crisis of visual perception of images *per se* owing to a widespread 'anti-visual prejudice', which transpires in comic puns as well as in monologues expressing inner debate on the true nature of visual experience. Among others, these are reasons for recommending the use of this clever Dictionary.

INDEX

Mots-clés: couleur, culture, ekphrasis, emblème, héraldique, image, imagination, miniature, monument, paragone, perception, portrait, œil, optique, art visuel

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AUTHORS

RAPHAËLLE COSTA DE BEAUREGARD

Professeur Emérite

Université de Toulouse 2-Jean Jaurès

r.costa-de-beauregard@wanadoo.fr